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By concentrating on critical analyses of motion pictures, English teachers at all levels can instruct their classes in the intelligent viewing of screen presentations. Teachers should emphasiz e that the film maker uses the powerful techniques of camera placement and the "rhythm of cutting" to determine the impact of the movie, that the image, not the word, is all important; and that films have similarities to traditional literature (e.g., the film simile and sound or visual symbolism). Films like "The Great Adventure," "The Miracle Worker," or "On the Waterfront" can be used as the basis for writing assignments on the use of film techniques. (JS)

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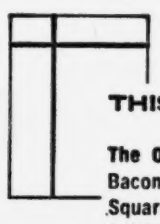

THIS MONTH'S COVER

The Odyssey as depicted by Paul Bacon on the new Washington Square Press Reader's Enrichment edition of this classic.

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HOW TO READ A MOVIE by Robert G. Lambert

Although we teachers spend years helping students read black print on white paper, most of our students will achieve far more eyestrain watching screens—both electronic and motion picture—than pages. even now, surveys reveal many students spend as much time daily watching TV as they do attending class. Whether we bookworms like it or not, the screen provides information and escape at a rate and with an intensity that is awesome.

Instead of just decrying this trend by "not having" a TV set in the house or by sniping at the latest movie version of a classic novel, English teachers at all levels should include in their classes elementary instruction in how to look at or "read" screen presentations.

No greater indication and condemnation of the "ivory towerism" or the irrelevance of past high school English teaching can be found than in the Neilsen ratings of television programs. *Bewitched* and *Gomer Pyle* flourish while *East Side, West Side* and *The Defenders* are rooted out of program schedules. Had English teachers in the thirties made a real effort to train their students in a grammar of the screen, perhaps more worthwhile drama might appear, more Chayefskys and Roses develop.

Even in what librarians would call non-fiction, mass audiences lack discrimination. Such a fine, somber, and eloquent documentary as CBS News' *World War I* ended up as one of the bottom ten on the Neilsen scale.

GOLD IN OLD MOVIES

Because of the disappointing response of the mass audience to originality and quality, often the only things worth watching are old movies. Yet this showing of old movies can provide the English teachers with a key to improving TV schedules in 1980. To do this English teachers should concentrate on the critical analysis of motion pictures. Movies offer an exceptionally tempting field because they can not only be viewed on Sunday afternoons at home, but they can be shown in the classroom when the class meets. Further, new technological developments like the 8 mm. cartridge projector—a device shaped like an attaché case with a screen on one side and a slot on one end into which a reel of film is simply inserted—will allow even the most fumble-fingered instructor to show a film, stop the picture, reverse it, and run it with the ease of adjusting a TV set.

Yet even with the new gimmicks, if we are to teach the film successfully, we need to reorient ourselves, to overcome the natural prejudice of the English teacher for the WORD. In film, IMAGE is king. Films are quite literally *moving* pictures, a flow of images. Dialogue is of less importance than many of us would like to admit. Edward Fisher tells his students to imagine a film with the sound turned off. Bad. But try to imagine hearing a sound track without being able to see the picture.

THE KINDEST CUT OF ALL

In viewing a film it is *how* we see things—above all else—that determines the impact of a movie. The filmmaker has at his disposal two powerful techniques: camera placement and what I call the rhythm of cutting.

Camera placement, the equivalent of the writer's point of view, can make the mighty seem humble, the lowly great. To denigrate royalty, for example, a director might place the camera far above a coronation procession, making it look for all the world like a parade of ants. Or he might glorify a stoop-shouldered beggar by placing the camera below the beggar and shooting up into his chest and face. Shooting from below can create fear as well as awe: movie monsters are often shown from below so that Wolfman and his colleagues tower over the terrified audience.

But camera placement alone doesn't determine the audiences' reaction to a scene in a movie: what goes before and comes after are also crucial. This rhythm of cutting that helps determine audience reaction can best be explained when one realizes that films are not shot sequentially. The last scene in a movie may be shot first; a scene that appears an hour before THE END appears on the screen may actually be the final scene filmed. The film editor or director has thousands of feet of unconnected scenes that he must arrange in a story-telling sequence: movies and stars are both on the cutting room floor before they are seen in completed form.

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In editing the film, the director will try to use the length of each shot to psychological advantage. For instance, he may wish to show an Indian attack a stagecoach. The first shot of the sequence lasts a long time (12 seconds). It shows a long shot of the stagecoach moving down a vast canyon. The director suddenly switches to a close-up of an Indian face. We are jolted by the instantaneous switch from long shot to close-up. To gain even more tension, the director cuts back to the placid stage coach lumbering along for eight seconds, then to an even nearer close-up of the scarred face of the Indian for six seconds. As the Indian gallops down the slope to the stage coach the director cuts back and forth in an ever shortening rhythm: coach, five seconds; Indian, four; coach, three seconds; Indian, two; coach, two. Finally, enough tension has been built up by the rhythm of cutting to sustain the final assault.

All this tension has been created by camera shots that may have been made days and miles apart. A camera crew may have spent a morning in August at Cheyenne, Wyoming. Three months later in Hollywood the close-ups of the scarred Indian may have been taken. It doesn't matter: shown sequentially on a movie screen, no one doubts that the Indian is watching the stage instead of the palm tree he was really focussing on. These strong psychological manipulations that occur in watching a film can explain why even a bad movie is seldom as dull as a bad novel or stage play. Too much is happening to the viewer for him to be thoroughly bored, however inept the filmmaker.

Yet despite the emphasis on visual psychology, films still have many links with the more traditional literature we teach. A shot of people jamming into an already overloaded subway car may be followed by a picture of bawling cattle being herded into stockyard pens. Then the director switches back to the subway car. In doing so, he has created a film simile: New Yorkers at rush hour are like cattle in the Chicago stockyards.

Traditional literary symbolism is commonly employed in films. In a recent talk Edward Fisher noted that Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* uses images of fire and water throughout to symbolize the struggle between evil and good, death and life. And once seen, who can forget the butterfly in the closing scene of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The hero reaches out of the mucky trench to grasp the butterfly, the only beautiful thing on the whole battlefield. In doing so he raises his helmeted head a few inches above the trench. A second later a bullet pierces the helmet and the soldier falls lifeless to the planking of the trench.

Sound as well as physical objects can function symbolically, as it does in *On the Waterfront*. Edie is being told that her brother has been killed in an unloading "accident." Yet the audience only sees the faces on the screen talking; their actual speech is drowned out by the clamor of dockwork. As soon as Edie hears of her brother's death, she opens her mouth to scream. But Kazan then cuts to a closeup of a steam whistle as it shrieks to signal noon. The blast of the steam and the shriek of the whistle powerfully symbolize the pent up emotions within Edie finally bursting forth in her own scream.

WHAT DID YOU SEE HOW?

To make my own students aware of such aesthetic problems, I show them Arne Sucksdorff's *The Great Adventure* (Contemporary Films, 75 min., 16 mm.)—a study of woodland animals and their responses to the cycle of the seasons and of the shifting relationship between a small boy and his pet otter. I also encourage them to see such films as *The Miracle Worker* (United-Artists, 107 min., 16 mm.) or *On the Waterfront* (Brandon Films, Inc., 108 min., 16 mm.) on their home TV screens. Just after they see a film, I ask them to write up a ten minute sequence of the film that tells not only *what* but *how* they saw. Where were the cameras placed? How did this placement affect your perception? Your emotions? Was the cutting rapid or leisurely? Why? Were any of the objects photographed treated symbolically? How do you know?

The results of these papers are unusually gratifying. Students can be helped to respond, to show sensitivity to the screen before them. As is usual, however, such an assignment is not without dangers: Wrote one student: "Sucksdorff's use of cutting is too obtrusive; he is obviously using unrelated film clips of various animals and joining them together so that they appear sequential."

But the majority don't seem to have their fun spoiled by technical awareness. After they turn in their written exercise, I say, "Next time you go to the movies, keep noticing for ten minutes what the director does with the camera and how he places the action through rhythmic cutting. Even if you may have to do this between kisses, at least try it."

I've been told some of them do.